

## Reputational geographies and urban social cohesion

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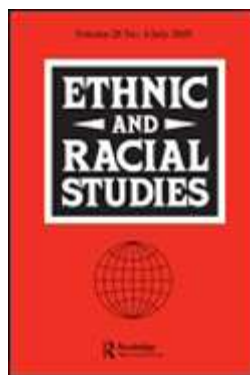
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## Reputational Geographies and Urban Social Cohesion

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Reputational Geographies and Urban Social Cohesion

Abstract

This article adds to recent literature in migration studies on the importance of place and space by drawing on extended interviews with residents in the Alum Rock area of East Birmingham. Our central theme is the exploration of reputational geographies; the symbolic and material boundaries drawn around places as indicators of social status, sites of memories, and repositories of affect that can have profound socio-economic as well as emotional consequences for city residents. We argue that research and policy addressing urban social diversity must display a greater sensitivity to the deeply felt affiliations to, and memories of, local settings expressed by our respondents. We conclude that contemporary debates about multiculturalism and urban social cohesion require greater attention to the particularities of place and local identity.

**Keywords:** belonging, community, multiculturalism, place, social cohesion, social identities

What are the chances that we can construct in our cities shared, diverse, just, more inclusive and egalitarian forms of common life, guaranteeing the full rights of democratic citizenship and participation to all on the basis of equality, whilst respecting the differences that inevitably come about when peoples of different religions, cultures, histories, languages and traditions are obliged to live together in the same shared space? (Hall 2006, p. 23)

There can be few more testing locations for addressing what Stuart Hall defines as ‘the multicultural question’ than the area around the Alum Rock Road in Saltley, Birmingham. A district of long-established South Asian settlement three miles East of Birmingham city centre, it is one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Britain with half the local population living in breadline poverty (Dorling et al. 2007, p. 50). Even before the January 2007 arrests of nine Birmingham men suspected of involvement in terrorism, Alum Rock was emblematic of inner city areas held to lack social cohesion, placed under surveillance, feared and by-passed by the majority. Yet despite these immediate and long-term difficulties Alum Rock has witnessed no large-scale disturbances of the kind seen in October 2005 in the Lozells area of Birmingham, or in

several Northern English towns in 2001. One of the local people we interviewed after the 2007 arrests in Alum Rock reported empathy shown to the predominantly Muslim population by some Irish local residents who recalled the suspicion they endured after the November 1974 Birmingham pub bombings: ‘we’ve had Irish people coming into our shop saying “what you’re going through now we went through in the 1970s” ’ (‘Imran’, aged 35). Furthermore, among local residents and institutions working for social justice outside party politics there are networks and sentiments with the potential to answer Hall’s multicultural question positively.

This article contributes to a growing literature emphasising the importance of local contexts in understanding contemporary multiculturalism and social cohesion (Dwyer, Shah and Sanghera 2008; Herbert 2008; Clayton 2009; Ellis and Almgren 2009; Gielis 2009). We argue that exploring the complex interplay between identities, inequalities and belonging requires a move away from an exclusive emphasis on national identity, a greater sensitivity to the importance of places in shaping trajectories of integration, and the infusion of a more geographically sensitive exploration of the politics of belonging into the analysis of the ‘unruly, untidy and convivial mode of interaction in which differences have to be actively negotiated’ (Gilroy 2006, p. 43).

Debates on community cohesion need to recognize ‘the forms of *emotional work* that comprise urban experiences’ (Pile 2005, p. 3, emphasis in original; see also Davidson, Bondi and Smith 2005). This emotional work involves the construction, reproduction and contestation of what we term here reputational geographies. These are social imaginaries defining an area as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, safe or volatile, ‘no-go’ or peaceful. Reputational geographies refer to the symbolic and material boundaries drawn

around places as indicators of social status, sites of memories, and repositories of affect that can have profound socio-economic as well as emotional consequences for local residents. Our focus is on the everyday practices that create and dispute these reputational geographies and thereby sustain ‘networks and experiences of belonging and conviviality’ (Neal and Walters 2008, p. 282).

The complexities of urban social diversity we explore here were condensed in one interview encounter in early 2009. Two young men offered a long and intense discourse about Western imperialism and the events of 9/11, expressing sympathy with related conspiracy theories. One of these respondents had inscribed his transnational solidarities on the local streetscape by engaging an urban street artist to paint a ‘Free Gaza Mural’ on the wall of a nearby house. This was only displayed for a short while before Birmingham City Council removed it (Oruye 2009). Whilst this incident was retold, the gaze of the interviewer fell on a large blue flag draped across one side of the room. When asked to explain this allegiance to Birmingham City Football Club, the young man replied with intensity equalling his self-identity as a Muslim, ‘You know, my motto is, “born a Brummie, die a Brummie”’. Our argument here attempts to capture multidimensional affiliations like these that combine powerfully felt local and transnational identifications. As Vertovec (2009, p. 77) states, ‘the multi-local life world presents a wider, ever more complex set of conditions that affect the construction, negotiation and reproduction of social identities’ (Vertovec 2009, p.77). The dominant framework for approaching these questions in Britain – centred on community cohesion and integration – is insufficiently attuned to these complexities (Cantle 2008).

### Researching urban complexities

Our aim is to develop an approach to exploring urban social complexity that is sensitive to the interweaving of textures of place (Adams *et al.* 2001) across several dimensions: local practices of belonging; national and transnational imaginaries; the material conditions shaping daily social interactions. Building this framework requires an unpacking of existing concepts and a recalibration of both theories and methodologies. The first requirement is greater clarity about the key terms community, cohesion, and integration. Recent British government policy documents define cohesion and integration in remarkably similar, almost circular, terms. For instance guidance on building a local sense of belonging defines community cohesion as ‘what must happen in all communities to enable different groups to get on well together’ and integration as ‘what must happen to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another’ (DCLG 2009, p. 12). It is unclear here whether cohesion and integration are outcomes, processes, or conditioning factors shaping social relations. Conflating and fusing community and cohesion from the outset rather than regarding their relationship as contingent, and communities as forged through social action and political conflict is also problematic.

The second weakness in much recent commentary is an over-eagerness to assume that ‘Community cohesion should also work on the basis that it can be measured (...)’ (Cantle 2008, p. 174). Both proponents of the cohesion agenda and its critics (Finney and Simpson 2009) leave little room for exploring the qualities of everyday associational life and its affective consequences. More specifically, a notable absence in nationally focused debates about integration is sustained attention to the particularities of place. Thus, for

example, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007, pp. 27-29) emphasizes that the inter-relationships between diversity, deprivation and cohesion are complex and locality-specific; at the same time, it also specifies several generic area-profiles that ‘seem to have particular problems with cohesion’ including ‘ethnically diverse urban areas experiencing new migration’ (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007, pp. 30-31). What receives too little attention in such accounts are the spatial and infrastructural peculiarities of specific locales, the impact of wider – national and transnational – social and political forces on them, as well as the sensitivities, life histories and motivations of their residents.

The spatial turn in the social and human sciences has begun to be addressed in literature on migration (Gielis 2009). Our emphasis on reputational geographies builds on this by highlighting the affective dimensions to urban everyday life. Relational accounts of place (Massey 1994) open onto memories of struggle, narratives of social change, tensions and ambivalences around belonging, and the co-existence of contradictory emotions about the localities to which many feel profoundly attached, despite their difficulties. Places confer physical, infrastructural and symbolic resources, and potentially disadvantages, on their residents. Recognising that attachments to place are formative and not simply reactive to wider social forces produces a richer understanding of ‘contexts of reception’ for migrants and their descendants, encompassing the cultural frames and structures of meaning that shape perceptions and actions (Levitt et al. 2008).

Our study draws on extended semi-structured interviews held during 2006 to 2009 with forty local people. We chose individuals – broadly reflective of Alum Rock’s demography – with businesses or places of worship on or near the main commercial

artery, the Alum Rock Road. We also interviewed a local councillor and activists encountered at local public meetings. We asked respondents about their experiences of living in the area, their responses to media coverage of Alum Rock, the everyday significance of religious and ethnic boundaries, concluding with discussion of their feelings, hopes and visions for the locality. Amidst a growing political commonsense proclaiming the end of multiculturalism and calling for integration and the downplaying of difference, it is imperative to understand 'what actually happens on the ground' (Grillo 2007, p. 981). This is particularly true of a context like Alum Rock which at first glance exhibits the tendencies of (religious) self-segregation underlying recent national and local policies on community cohesion (Home Office 2005; Wetherell, Laflèche and Berkeley 2007; Jayaweera and Choudhury 2008).

In what follows we explore the interaction between local contexts, short and long-distance networks, deeply sedimented memories and everyday practices. This dense interweaving of urban textures generates narratives of belonging and trajectories of integration expressed in the interviews through powerful attachments to place, evident even in the act of acknowledging the problematic nature of the territory being claimed:

As well as family I also have a deep physical connection with the area (...) I think somebody needs to dig under the ground and see if there's this kind of iron ore (...) exerting this magnetic field, exerting this attraction on people. There is something about Birmingham, this area, this community, (...) sense of security, a sense of belonging, even with a high crime rate, but people feel safer here than in [other] area[s] ('Zaheer', 31).



Such testimonies illustrate the habitus of a group of local residents we have interviewed, the deep-seated motivations informing their desire to change the Alum Rock in which they were raised, shedding further light on how local social actors live with, and struggle against, the inequalities that define their lives.

**Understanding reputational geographies**

Analysis of representational histories and biographical narratives is essential in offering more nuanced interpretations of keywords such as ‘integration’ and ‘parallel lives’ underpinning the current policy of promoting community cohesion (Home Office 2005; Commission for Integration and Cohesion 2007; Cantle 2008). As Paul Gilroy observes, the neo-assimilationist thrust of the ongoing retreat from multiculturalism in British political discourse equates dissent with disloyalty and sets solidarity against diversity (Gilroy 2006). However, his favoured alternative, ‘unruly convivial multicultural’ (Gilroy 2006, p. 43), needs to emerge through the mundane activities of political contestation and institutional mobilization in particular localities as well as the ‘exhilarating cultural interaction’ (Gilroy 2006, p. 29) he analyzes with customary skill. Analysis of urban social change that builds on Gilroy’s suggestive idea of conviviality should be spatially sensitive without lapsing into environmental determinism or dissipating place-based affiliations along global networks. In this endeavour recent theoretical and empirical work in cultural geography offers significant resources (Massey, 1994 and 2004; Gieryn, 2000; Borer, 2006).

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3 Firstly, the concept of place is detached from its association with a tightly  
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5 bounded and homogeneous community. Places are composed of intersecting social  
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7 relations and diverse histories, derived from well beyond the immediate territorial  
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9 boundaries of the locale concerned:  
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15 the crisscrossing of social relations, of broad historical shifts and the continually  
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17 altering spatialities of the daily lives of individuals, make up something of what a  
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19 place means, of how it is constructed *as* a place (Massey 2001, p. 462).  
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24 Instead of thinking of places as ‘areas with boundaries (...)’, they can be imagined as  
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26 articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings’ a large  
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28 proportion of which are defined on a scale well beyond that of the place itself (Massey  
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30 1994, p. 154). As one of the local Christian ministers we interviewed stated:  
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36 Whilst local politics and local concerns are very much the bread and butter of the  
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38 local people, it’s also the case that there are global issues that are almost local  
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40 issues at the same time, so in a community like this it could be Kashmir, or the war  
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42 in Iraq, those so-called global issues, or the so-called war on terror. Those global  
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44 issues are felt locally, and they become ‘glocal’, a combination of there and here.  
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51 Secondly, the spatial manifestations of power relationships, what Massey terms ‘power-  
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53 geometries’, position different social groups in very distinct ways in relation to the flows  
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55 and interconnections which continually unsettle and recompose any place. As ‘place is  
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space invested with meaning in the context of power’ (Cresswell 2004, p. 12), the field of power demands sustained attention. This entails an exploration of how neighbourhood, city-wide, national and regional agencies govern and regulate an area like Alum Rock through increasingly complex partnership arrangements. Inherited loyalties are redeployed and redefined in new spatial contexts with political agendas shaped by local, national, and European funding streams and tiers of governance. One interviewee had left his job in the private sector to form a social enterprise (COMM: PACT) to counter the disadvantages experienced by local young people in particular. He described how in securing a £10,000 grant for a project attempting to counter on-street car racing he had to learn the language of cohesion, partnership working and place the organization inside previously distant institutional networks:

We went through the process, and the positives are that we got the bid and that we got further training in terms of capacity building, so it was a learning curve for us (‘Masood’, aged 34).

Thirdly cultural geography highlights the formation of identities across a range of geographical scales. The scales of street, neighbourhood, city, nation and diaspora motivate, organize and respond to social action, but ‘existing scalar vocabularies are rather poorly equipped to grasp the complex, perpetually changing interconnections and interdependencies among geographical scales’ (Brenner 2004, p. 7). Analysis of the scalar dynamics of everyday life demands a close reading of signs, symbols and their spatial inscription. In this critical cultural geography the binaries of local versus global,

place versus space are readily subverted by complex networks of action, affect and allegiance which resist easy categorization. Even those who having migrated largely stay in one location thereafter are positioned in social fields with transnational dimensions (Alissa Trotz 2006). This is most notable in several of the local mosques where the religious identity of 'Muslim' can (but may not always) transcend ethnic divisions, as one of the youth workers at a large Sunni mosque near the Alum Rock Road explained:

We also have quite a lot of Somalis who come here, and we also have quite a lot of converts like Afro-Caribbean (...) who come here every now and then, and then we have a few white guys, we call them 'white brothers', who come here ('Nasser', aged 25)

As well as Massey's sense of place defined by 'a global sense of the local' we need to understand the local senses of the global which define the uniqueness of a place:

Inherent in the local is the concept of place (...) the resonance of a specific location (...) known and familiar (...) a layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened here, what will happen there (Lippard 1997, p. 7).

This more open understanding of place cuts across Manuel Castells' suggestive but ultimately simplistic opposition between the space of flows and the space of places

(Castells 2000). Castells defines the space of flows as the arena of circulation for elite cosmopolitans. By contrast the space of places is the realm of social and physical immobility. At first sight Alum Rock is the ultimate space of place, with among the highest infant mortality rates in Britain, and the highest proportion of 16-24 year olds (54%) not in education, employment and training (Walker 2007). Yet Alum Rock, like any social field carefully explored, is more accurately defined as a *place of flows*. This is evident in its store fronts, the Islamic banks despatching remittances and earthquake aid to Pakistan, the shops selling Asian music and DVDs, the food markets and fabric emporiums. As one shopowner described the main shopping street:

Alum Rock Road is the heart of the area. It's where all the arteries lead up to. It's where all the activity is, you've grown up with that in your mind (...). Everyone who comes from all the different areas now will come and shop on this road. So, for them symbolically, this is THE road, it is the heart ('Imran', aged 35).

Yet this microspatiality co-exists with extensions of the local social field. Whilst highly protective of local territory, Alum Rock residents are drawn to events and locations far beyond the district's boundaries. The 2005 earthquake in Kashmir mobilized not just funds but practical volunteer activity including time spent in the region itself by one of the residents we interviewed. Local identities and actions may be place-focused but they are not confined to a single locale, they utilize and redirect long-distance flows of finance and inspiration. Localities like Alum Rock are key nodes in transnational social fields (Levitt 2009), sites where networks converge, temporarily crystallise and generate new

flows, both material and ideational, of economic, social and symbolic resources. Among the most important of these is what we term reputational geography. This captures the symbolic capital signified by an area. Living in a particular place can be a positional good (Duncan and Duncan 2001), a shorthand for location in a social hierarchy, and depending on social context and cultural framing, has the potential to be a mark of distinction and/or a check on social mobility.

### **The reputational geography of Alum Rock**

The reputational geography of a district is shaped by the perception of the wider city it is part of. A number of works have taken Birmingham as the setting to explore the social and political mobilization of increasingly diverse populations. Birmingham is seen as an exemplary space, where the future of Britain's racialized politics is prefigured (Sandercock 2003). Alum Rock must be placed in the context of several generations of research into Birmingham's racialized social relations.

Rex and Moore's study of Sparkbrook, two miles South of Alum Rock, highlighted the importance of council housing policies in shaping 'the zone of transition' in which a mainly male sojourner population subsisted in multi-occupancy housing (Rex and Moore 1967). A generation later Solomos and Back traced the cultural politics of race and ethnicity in 1980s Birmingham, and the emergence of elected political representatives from Black and Asian backgrounds. The 'complex struggle for political influence and representation within multiracial cities such as Birmingham' they documented (Solomos and Back 1995, p. 170) has become even more fraught in the last

decade. During the late 1990s and early 2000s Garbaye documented the growing tensions between Birmingham’s South Asians and the previously hegemonic local Labour parties. Closely fought electoral battles between Labour, Liberal Democrat and smaller parties such as the People’s Justice Party culminated in controversies about alleged malpractice in the assembling of postal votes by candidates (Garbaye 2005).

The war on terror, the politics of asylum, and a more complicated demography of immigration must be added to the intergenerational changes among the post-war migrant populations who figured in those studies of other Birmingham districts. With specific reference to Alum Rock, the 2001 Census reported over three-quarters of the local population to be from a black or minority ethnic background, predominantly Pakistani (Birmingham City Council 2006). This ethnodemography is inscribed on the local landscape in the proliferation of mosques and madrasas, in shop window notices testifying to the salience of global formations such as the Kashmiri diaspora, and since 2001 the growing presence of migrants from Somalia and – to a lesser extent than in other parts of the city – Eastern Europe.

Alum Rock regularly makes media headlines through its condensation of high unemployment, crime, and racialized discourses of white fear. Nationally, in 2008 the Alum Rock Road featured as the site of the threatened arrest of two Christian evangelists handing out leaflets (‘Christian preachers face arrest in Birmingham’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 June 2008, p.16). Locally, in the aftermath of the May 2006 council elections a British National Party candidate in Birmingham declared, ‘There are already no-go areas for whites in Birmingham, like Alum Rock, which is wrong’ (*Birmingham Mail*, 8 May 2006, p. 6). Such sentiments were amplified in media depictions of the January 2007

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3 arrests. Police-guarded houses took the place of mugshots in the accusatory optic,  
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6 pinpointing the location of suspects' homes through a chilling cartography combining  
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8 snapshots of cordoned-off properties with Google Earth generated images of Alum Rock  
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10 from on high. These mirrored the surveillance sightline of the spy plane alleged to have  
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12 flown over the district for several hours on the day of the arrests (e.g. 'The Suburban  
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14 Streets at the Centre of the Terror Raids', *Daily Mail*, 1 February 2007, p. 4). The arrests  
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16 of January 2007 were merely the latest in a series of police raids in Alum Rock focusing  
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18 on men suspected of involvement in the failed attacks on London of 21 July 2005, and  
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20 the air security alert of August 2006. Partly in response, the lampposts and street signs of  
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22 the Alum Rock Road have been a regular site for the posting of radical political  
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24 messages. In May 2007 stickers advertising a demonstration in London calling for an  
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26 'end to British oppression of Muslims' were torn down by one of our interviewees who  
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28 lamented their regular appearance in the locality, apparently posted by outsiders:  
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36 But when stickers are put in year after year, and the only thing the council does is  
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38 rip them off, even this instance they ripped them off the minute the article was in  
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40 the paper, but no one actually came to clean the residue off, and that happens year  
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42 after year. So you've got grubby lampposts. You can still see stickers glorifying  
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44 'the magnificent 19' (the men responsible for the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001)  
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46 faded, but still there ('Liam', aged 25)  
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53 Interventions like this were vigorously contested by local residents whose reflections on  
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55 their lives in Alum Rock expressed a sensual embodied attachment to places bound up  
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with memories of migration, struggle and intergenerational progress not captured by the rather bland designation ‘context of reception’ (Portes and Rumbaut 2001) notwithstanding its analytic virtues.

**Reputation, reflexivity and ambivalence**

Researching reputational geographies requires sensitivity to the strong emotional investments in what an interviewee termed ‘the physicalness’ of a locality. In this case residents’ memories centred on the main Alum Rock Road itself, what one resident described as the ‘sentimental, and soft wooly factors associated with it. So people born and brought up here have this connection back to the road’ (‘Zaheer’, aged 31). This emotional charge animating investments in the locality was reflected in the responses interviewees such as ‘Mohsin’ gave to the ways in which Alum Rock is routinely denigrated by outsiders:

M: I think we get the mick taken out of us...

Int: How do you mean?

M: That we are run-down. I work at [...] and when you mention Alum Rock to them they just laugh at your face, and I have to laugh with them, just to keep the joke, you should still have a sense of humour, you have to get on with people (...) They say things like, ‘You Asians are this, that and the other’, ‘Do you ever spot a white man?’. It’s things like that. I mean there’s been remarks made in the past that

there's been leaflets on the lampposts saying, 'No whites allowed after...' and I've never come across it ('Mohsin', aged 37).

Many residents were keen to challenge what they felt were endemic misperceptions of Alum Rock as a 'no-go area' for white people:

Eight out of ten people when they find out I'm from Alum Rock, the first thing they ask me is, 'Is it true white people aren't allowed in Alum Rock after 8 o'clock?'. I don't know where they got that from, I don't know where they got that from (...) So I just say to them, 'Where did you get that from, and it's not true, do you hear me?' But a lot of people say that ('Haq', aged 19).

Andrew, a long-standing white resident, was adamant in disputing the idea that white people were not welcome in Alum Rock:

A: I say, 'Come to the area and see. Chat to the people'. They will chat to you, no problem at all (...) Everybody's friendly...

Int: A lot of people outside the area wouldn't necessarily assume that.

A: Well, I think that's because they haven't been in the area. They've only heard the hearsay, they haven't actually been here. You could come round here at 11, 12 o'clock at night, and we'll have Somalians, we'll have Muslims, we'll have Blacks

round here, we'll have whites round here. I'll walk round here...I've left this shop at one o'clock in the morning before now, no problem at all. ('Andrew', aged 52)

Yet reputational geographies are often highly ambivalent. The same interviewee could both defend Alum Rock against adverse representations and recall incidents of concern and discomfort. Whilst disputing the idea of Alum Rock as a no-go area 'Mohsin' reported witnessing an altercation one evening where an elderly Englishman was being asked 'What are you doing in our area?' by a group of young Asian men. 'Zaheer' recognized the fine line between local pride and the cultivation of an exclusionary territoriality skirted by such incidents:

The other thing is as a community, there is this kind of confidence and then where do you draw the line between confidence, and cockiness and arrogance? And then even blatant bigotry, where do you draw those lines? I don't think what's being exhibited on Alum Rock Rd is 'this is our territory, it's a no-go area' (...) I don't think there's any of that at all. So if people interpret it that way, you have to question where is that interpretation coming from? ('Zaheer', aged 31)

Adverse reputational geographies can have profound socio-economic consequences in shaping life chances. Several interviewees recalled how when they were young they downplayed coming from Alum Rock, particularly when seeking employment, a practice one community worker felt young people applying for jobs today still adopted. This was confirmed by two volunteer youth workers. One had been advised to remove Alum Rock

from the name of the youth organisation he ran if he was to have any chance of securing large-scale funding. Another had been counselled to remove Alum Rock from job application forms:

We don't get jobs if we put Alum Rock on the form. I believe that, I believe that for real (...) If I was applying for Royal Bank of Scotland, say, it matters what you say, because certain people that have got good jobs, that I know, they will say to me, change the way you speak. The way you speak is not good enough they tell me. They want me to change the way I speak, to put Saltley instead of Alum Rock ('Haq', aged 19).

One interviewee described a more recent determination among local residents and traders to counter misperceptions by regenerating the main local shopping area: 'There was an element of "If they're saying it's crap, we're going to prove it's better" ' ('Zaheer', aged 31).

### Countering reputational geographies

This determination to dispute dominant images of Alum Rock lay behind the emergence of a new generation of local activists working outside party politics. Having grown up in Alum Rock, studied away and then returned, their commitment to secure social justice was readily apparent. The forty people we have interviewed include several of the key protagonists – self-defined as Muslim, British and Brummie, aged from 24 to 39 – in

these emerging networks that have emerged as key nodes in our study of Alum Rock.  
One of them explained:

There's people moved out to Edgbaston, Kings Heath, Sutton (*suburbs of Birmingham*) (...), but they look back to where their roots are in the UK, with that sense of responsibility, of returning...not even what's due, it's a sense of sharing (...) From an Islamic perspective, there's a phenomenal amount of nourishment, goodness and benefit which could be contributed to British society as a whole, and our own streets particularly – and it's ironic saying that, 'our own streets', in a Brummie sense – and making our own UK a better society ('Zaheer', aged 31).

Understanding how such sentiments mingling affiliations to local, national, and Muslim identities are starting to express themselves in both identity narratives and political action is one of the most important tasks facing researchers today. Our interviews reveal that ethnicity and religion are not abandoned as forces motivating social action, but are being reworked together with other local, national and transnational loyalties in the pursuit of claims for social justice. Among our interviewees we found a British born or educated generation forced to re-examine their allegiances since 2001. Dissatisfied with mainstream institutions, many attributed part of what one volunteer youth worker described as 'two decades of neglect' of Alum Rock to the dominance of clan-based allegiances in local politics:

When somebody stands for election they won't choose him for his stance or for his party manifesto. But these people they will say, 'oh this person he belongs to our village, let's vote for him', regardless of whether the person is the biggest idiot on the block, which the majority of them are. So the biggest idiot on the block, the man can't speak good English, and he's going to represent the community? I don't see much hope for that area ('Nasser', aged 25).

Partly in response, some interviewees had explored different dimensions of their Muslim faith:

This whole issue of service to humanity is quite deeply ingrained in Islamic teaching (...) there's this movement and I think more of it falls within a Sufi domain (...) but there's this element of social welfare and of contribution back to humanity, and I get the sense in the last two years, this has grown (...) quite a lot, and (...) in my opinion it has grown for the better, because I think it tends to disseminate more tolerant views, and it tends to also facilitate change with patience and compassion ('Zaheer', aged 31).

Crucially, and in stark contrast to widely circulating public discourses that assume ethnicity and religion to have inevitably agency-denying consequences, these quotations demonstrate reflexivity and honesty. The local significance of ethnic identities and cultural traditions must not be assumed but needs to be investigated. The *structures of action, ways of seeing* and *structures of feeling* provided by ethnicity and religion are

certainly capable of informing – but they do not single-handedly determine – people’s sense of self, their everyday practices and political solidarities (see Hussain and Bagguley 2005; Anthias 2007; Karner 2007; Levitt 2008). This reconfiguration of affiliations to local and translocal sources of meaning need not involve the repudiation of tradition, but its reworking and revitalisation. The complex articulation of ethnicity with gender, class and religion evident in Alum Rock is expressed in this observation by a local Christian minister:

The wearing of the *niqab*, contrary to the *Daily Mail* or *Daily Express* isn’t about the creation of a Taliban Islamic state in Birmingham. Some of the young women (...) are empowered young British Muslim women, they have consciously chosen to wear the *niqab*, and have not been pressurised, and are not timid, and have not been shut at home, or locked in the kitchen, or pushed into forced marriages, so it’s not an either/or.

These examples indicate that while constrained by the multiple power structures to which they are subject, individuals are also capable of resistance. They continually negotiate their identities, they may contest and reinterpret dominant frameworks of understanding and thus become agents of cultural change and political transformation.

Exploring Alum Rock and other urban localities as multidimensional social fields where local and transnational flows intersect requires three methodological strategies. Firstly, an exploration of key social settings such as mosques, internet cafes, shops and restaurants; secondly an analysis of the changing discursive repertoires of cohesion,

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3 accommodation and cultural transformation evident in narrating the encounter with new  
4 differences in both local and transnational institutional networks; thirdly an appreciation  
5 of the dead weight of past and present stigmatizing representations and the uphill task  
6 faced by those attempting to regenerate localities in the face of these adverse reputational  
7 geographies. For some local residents a sense of social injustice is clearly spatialized, and  
8 counteracting this is motivated by incredulity at the gross inequalities in life chances  
9 between inner city and suburbs in the West Midlands:

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22 There is a sense of injustice, that things aren't being done...someone in Knowle  
23 should not live longer than someone in Washwood Heath ('Imran', aged 35).  
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29 Thus far the informal group of which 'Imran' is a member has secured representation on  
30 local representative structures such as the Constituency Strategic Partnership, school  
31 governing bodies and the local Primary Care Trust. The group's initiatives include  
32 attempts to influence the location of a new health centre on a derelict Alum Rock Road  
33 site, a bid to redevelop vacant land into a social housing complex, and efforts to secure  
34 more books for local schools.  
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43 Interventions of this kind have an obvious relevance to ongoing debates in which  
44 social cohesion appears to have displaced multiculturalism as the aim of government  
45 policy (Abbas 2005; Modood 2005). Extended exploration of Alum Rock's local politics  
46 will discover whether this discursive shift can inspire a pluralistic politics transcending  
47 ethnic boundaries as one of the protagonists implies:  
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I would like to think we could make a reasonable difference to our own local environments, communities, neighbourhoods and that's against the backdrop, against all the racism ('Zaheer', aged 31).

The agonistic vision of contemporary politics evident in recent studies (e.g. Mouffe 2000; Amin 2005) is suggestive in depicting urban life as an unresolved struggle between unfinished, multiple identities. Yet too often in such work the complexity of ethical and political judgements is alluded to, without being traced to situated enactment in specific locations. The normative dispositions in these writings, and indeed in our own thinking, must be tested in an extended engagement with activities like those of the above-mentioned group. Can the activists' concern for social justice encompass the newly arrived as well as the long-established residents of Alum Rock? As the organizer of COMM: PACT argued:

This area overall has got issues with integration and cohesion. What we're trying to do downstairs [with an internet café] as a very small scale, is that we are trying to integrate everyone under one roof. Although you look at the age range, and that stands out that it's a young person's project, but then we are looking at old and young to integrate. But I'm also proud to say we've got a very diverse team downstairs in terms of Blacks, whites, Asians, Afghans, and new migrant communities coming in. Because jumping on a PC, there are no barriers, buying a coffee or a tea, there are no barriers ('Masood', aged 34).

The area around the Alum Rock Road provides a highly charged site for testing whether this vision of banal conviviality housed within an internet café can be generalized to other social settings.

## Conclusion

The January 2007 arrests and subsequent convictions of five local men accused of plotting to kill a British soldier added Alum Rock to the growing list of locations where the viability of Britain as a multicultural society has been questioned. Countering such simplistic diagnoses requires sensitive exploration of the multiple geographies of affiliation through which identities are formed and differences are negotiated in local contexts (Amin 2002). Research needs to be 'contextualized carefully without recourse to grand generalities about culture and faith' (Back et al 2009, p. 2) as nationally generated frameworks like the British government's community cohesion agenda are often insufficiently nuanced to capture local practices and sentiments (Flint 2010).

Place matters because, to rephrase Stuart Hall's well-known formulation (Hall et al. 1978, p. 394), place is the modality through which social class is lived. We have demonstrated the potent reputational geography of Alum Rock, the strong emotional responses prompted by the mere mention of 'Alum Rock', and the implications for self identity and social mobility of coming from that locality. The affective dimension of embodied attachments to place should be given greater recognition in discussions of community cohesion and integration. Textures of place are interwoven with many strands. The context of integration is ideational as well as institutional. Answering the

multicultural question posed by Stuart Hall demands an appreciation not just of the interaction between local settings, group resources such as religion, and labour and property markets; but also the symbolic weight and pressure of inherited reputations that can stigmatize whole generations (Bourdieu 1999). As Blokland (2009: 1594) argues the symbolic meanings of place captured in the dominant images circulating about a neighbourhood can misrepresent its social needs and accord that locality a disadvantaged position in a city’s spatial hierarchy.

The locally embedded nature of cohesion and integration is partially acknowledged in the policy frameworks of Britain’s Department for Communities and Local Government. For example the 2009 *Guidance on building a local sense of belonging* recognises the importance of cultivating positive feelings about local neighbourhoods for the promotion of civic engagement (DCLG 2009). However, the moral undertones of the community cohesion agenda continue to shape other nationally generated interventions, notably around Preventing Violent Extremism (HM Government 2008). This programme aims to prevent people becoming or supporting terrorists and as part of a nationwide initiative has allocated £2.4 million to Birmingham City Council for work on this agenda. The City Council identifies Alum Rock as one of several “areas of vulnerability” to radicalisation (Birmingham City Council 2009). The programme – which some of our respondents working in the voluntary sector had reservations about working with - tends to highlight presumed deficiencies in the local population’s beliefs and values, and to view localities through a ‘security risk’ prism, rather than directing meaningful funding streams to meet pressing socio-economic needs and thwarted political aspirations. The cohesion agenda underlying this work can also overlook the

kinds of mixed sentiments expressed by the young man at the start of this article who was as intense in his love for Alum Rock and Birmingham City Football Club as he was passionate in his defence of Islam and critique of American foreign policy.

When asked about the relevance of notions such as cohesion and integration for his outreach project, a local drugs worker stressed that far more important were tangible political responses to the *already existing* passion and pride for the locality that he'd encountered in his work, despite the disadvantages attached to coming from Alum Rock:

Alum Rock, Washwood Heath, a lot of the areas, have community advocates (...) that really want to make a difference and change the community they live in and are proud of where they come from. The media, people like me, practitioners, we often put down areas, but there are a lot of fantastic people living and working in the area, and I think it's up to (...) future politicians to take up the challenge that's set by the community (...) Tackling issues that concern the community, such as drugs, such as high unemployment in the area, low educational qualifications, not enough activities for young people, not enough for them to do, just the basic needs of the community: community centre, a swimming pool, a youth club (interview with 'Rohan', 28).

The call for a re-allocation of resources to address these basic needs and provide visible evidence of local infrastructural regeneration was a consistent theme in our interviews. Successive regeneration programmes addressed to East Birmingham as a whole – the so-called "Eastern Corridor" (Cole and Ferrari 2008) - have not proved sufficiently fine-

grained to alleviate the scale of the socio-economic problems of high unemployment and poor educational achievement in Alum Rock.

Despite these unmet needs and the complex challenges faced by its residents, Alum Rock is home to optimistic sentiments, as expressed by the local Catholic priest instrumental in helping to form an interethnic local residents' association:

(O)ne of its aims was an outreach and as a bridge, now it's happening (...) we can all form a community, each maintaining their own identity and traditions and faiths and backgrounds, but mixing and forming a community.

These words document an emergent sense of situated solidarity to be nurtured from below rather than legislated from above. Urban social cohesion requires struggles by such local organisations to secure social justice and contest reputational geographies that overlook the particularities of place.

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